

Dallas and the Lingering Trauma



The view from the sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository.

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DALLAS id Dallas kill Kennedy? Twenty-five years later, that question still rings in this city, and not as just another conspiracy theory. No one blames Washington for the deaths of Lincoln and Garfield, or Buffalo for the assassination of McKinley, yet in Dallas the notion of guilt, deserved or not, lingers in the headlines of local magazines and in the consciences of the citizens.

It has been said that past events become history when the public forgets the details. America has not yet let go of the details of that afternoon a quarter-century ago today.

As part of a recent psychology experiment, James Pennebaker, an associate professor at Southern Methodist University, questioned 200 Dallas natives and an equal number of outsiders about the assassination. About 25 percent of the outsiders over age 30 (old enough to remember Nov. 22, 1963) said they still blame

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Dallas for what happened. Eighteen percent of the Dallas natives agreed with that assessment, but an overwhelming number, 79 percent, believed that the rest of the world still holds them responsible.

Pennebaker said he became interested in the issue of blame as part of a larger study on the effects of socially unacceptable trauma. He contends that cities react to traumatic events much as individuals do, and that, as a rule, it is healthier for them to confront than to repress. His studies noted, for instance, that death rates from suicide, murder and heart disease rose markedly in Dallas in the years after the assassination, during a time when the city seemed determined to repress the tragedy.

"From the moment I moved here [in 1983], it struck me that people don't talk a lot about the assassination," Pennebaker said. "It's almost a forbidden topic. Even on the 'Dallas' TV show, I can't recall them ever mentioning it, and I consider that sort of symbolic of the civic attitude."

"I remember when I first got here, I went downtown to look at the site and there were no markers, and you couldn't get in the building [the Texas School Book Depository, from where Lee Harvey Oswald is said to have fired down on the president]. But then my studies showed that people here think about it all the time. They could not forget it, yet they would not deal with it."

That civic repression is about to

change, with the transformation of the sixth floor of the old schoolbook building into a \$3.5 million exhibit featuring films, 400 photographs, artifacts and interpretive displays on the cultural context of John F. Kennedy's death. The museum, operated by the Dallas County Historical Foundation, will give a preview showing today and officially opens early next year. As it nears completion, some of the responses to it have made Dallasites feel that they cannot win no matter what they do.

First, they were blamed for killing Kennedy. Then they were accused of trying to repress the event, and now some people are saying it is ghoulish to turn the assassin's lair into a shrine. Earlier this year, an official from the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, while not speaking for his institution or for the Kennedy family, expressed revulsion at the idea of the exhibit.

But there is a difference between facing up to history and exploiting tragedy, no matter how unpleasant the history might be. Dallas leaders have known for years that the depository, Dealey Plaza, the grassy knoll and that stretch of Elm Street leading down to the shadows of the underpass were, despite the lack of historical markers, perhaps the most heavily visited tourist spots in town.

Since county officials bought the depository in 1977 and turned it into an administration building, they have kept a guest book in the first-floor lobby. The thousands of names in that book, and the outpouring of emotional comments about Kennedy that

accompany the names, provided ample proof, year after year, that the place was turning into a shrine without any government encouragement or recognition.

"What we're dealing with is a demand for information about an important event in American history that is all too confusing," said Conover Hunt, curator of the Sixth Floor Exhibit, as it will be known. "Dallas had to face up to that demand and do it in a positive way. We are doing it by using history as a teaching tool. Ford's Theatre in Washington, the USS Ari-

zona at Pearl Harbor, Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, the Vietnam memorial—there are other tragic sites in the annals of our history. The audiences keep coming, and in part, they come to let go of a memory."

Hunt said the museum on Elm Street in downtown Dallas will be nonviolent. A segment of the famous Abraham Zapruder film of the Kennedy motorcade will be shown, but it will not include the frames in which Kennedy is hit by bullets. The southeast corner window, where the assassin is thought to have crouched, will be recreated to include boxes similar to those he might have leaned on, but his rifle will not be there, nor any of the spent cartridges, and the window will not be accessible to visitors. Although the location of the exhibit in effect endorses the official findings that Oswald killed Kennedy, other theories on the assassination will be included in the displays.

"We lay it all out and let the public draw conclusions," Hunt said. "The challenge here is to be fair, unbiased."

One of her hopes for the museum, Hunt said, was that it would have a cathartic effect on visitors somewhat like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. Pennebaker and Nels Paine, one of his psychology students, registered feelings of that sort recently in an experiment that they conducted with 25 people who were taken up to the sixth floor and asked to look out several windows including, finally, the southeast window. The people were hooked up to a device that measured nervousness—which increased markedly when they looked out from the rifleman's window.

Afterward, they were asked to "briefly describe your thoughts and feelings as you looked out the window from where Oswald shot Kennedy." Their responses, identified here by the hometown of each respondent,

reveal the many powerful meanings of this day, in this city and across the country and around the world:

■ Toronto: "He didn't do it."

■ Houston: "I thought about how he had a clear view to shoot President Kennedy."

■ Belfast: "Nervous, sad and a little dizzy."

■ San Francisco: "Sadness. How can this happen? What went through this man's mind? We are a country full of extreme violence—will we ever change?"

■ London: "I still feel great anger and suspicion regarding the killings of both J.F. Kennedy and Oswald. There are so many unanswered questions. I feel America has a great burden of shame to carry still."

■ Appleton, Wis.: "I was somewhat nervous—the whole incident is like a blurry nightmare after all these years. I am grateful to have had the chance to see this because I probably will never get to see this again. I don't like to travel much. I understand some of the area right around this spot has changed since the assassination."

■ Fort Worth: "Every other window had an unearthly, hollow gray starkness—but there was greenery and life outside that window [Oswald's]. Somehow, I always look for a brighter future. I'm a perpetual optimist. Standing there was strange."

■ Austin, Tex.: "I thought the assassination was tragic, senseless. I also thought that the shots were not that difficult with a slow-moving vehicle. Some vague uneasiness and sadness that is hard to define."

■ East Prairie, Mo.: "Seems impossible that it actually happened. Totally irrational action that changed the future of our country."